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## Posthumanist panic cinema: defining a genre

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**Abstract:** Mainstream American cinema around the turn of the twenty-first century was prolific in producing a specific representation of the individual in crisis: a human subject beset by an onslaught of forces alien to itself. The regularity with which this type of figure appeared in popular cinema was both a result of and contributed to practices of collective representation. Implicit in the assumption that popular narrative provide insight into the cultures that produce and circulate them is the concomitant assumption that identities and subjectivities are inseparable from stories cultures tell about themselves, and that upon closer examination, these stories will always tell something more about historical selves. Following this logic, popular cinematic representations can be treated as cultural artefacts that both form collective representations and reflect “collective preoccupations,” as Renée Hoogland has put it (213). Who, then, was this set-upon figure in popular cinema of recent decades, and what can his collective representation tell us about the ideas and sentiments Durkheim proposes as indicators of cultural concerns?

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# Posthumanist Panic Cinema

## Defining a Genre

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SCOTT LOREN

Collective representations are the result of an immense co-operation, which stretches out not only into space but into time as well; to make them, a multitude of minds have associated, united and combined their ideas and sentiments.

(EMILE DURKHEIM, *THE ELEMENTARY FORMS OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE*)

Mainstream American cinema around the turn of the twenty-first century was prolific in producing a specific representation of the individual in crisis: a human subject beset by an onslaught of forces alien to itself. The regularity with which this type of figure appeared in popular cinema was both a result of and contributed to practices of collective representation. Implicit in the assumption that popular narratives provide insight into the cultures that produce and circulate them is the concomitant assumption that identities and subjectivities are inseparable from stories cultures tell about themselves, and that upon closer examination, these stories will always tell something more about historical selves. Following this logic, popular cinematic representations can be treated as cultural artefacts that both form collective representations and reflect “collective preoccupations,” as Renée Hoogland has

put it (213). Who, then, was this set-upon figure in popular cinema of recent decades, and what can his collective representation tell us about the ideas and sentiments Durkheim proposes as indicators of cultural concerns?<sup>1</sup>

## THE LIBERAL HUMANIST SUBJECT

Charles Guignon begins his book *On Being Authentic* with reference to an event that was nothing short of a cultural happening in the United States: the reception of Phillip C. McGraw's *Self Matters: Creating Your Life from the Inside Out*. McGraw's 2001 self-help book struck a nerve with its American readership. On the *New York Times* bestseller list for 43 weeks, Guignon points out that *Self Matters* epitomized the style of "books, television talk show and magazine articles" in which the "idea of achieving an authentic existence" remained the topic of concern day in and day out in American media culture (1). It is no coincidence that McGraw came to prominence through his appearance on the Oprah Winfrey Show, which itself "has made authenticity a central theme for her six or seven million daily viewers" for nearly twenty-five years (ibid). McGraw's focus on authenticity may not be a new addition to the self-help/therapy-culture discourse of the time, but he is particularly interesting for two reasons: his level of prominence in popular media and the accuracy with which his "authentic self" mirrors the characteristics of the liberal humanist subject. Guignon quotes McGraw as follows:

The authentic self is the *you* that can be found at your absolute core. It is the part of you that is not defined by your job, or your function, or your role. It is the composite of all your unique gifts, skills, abilities, interests, talents, insights, and wisdom. It is all your strengths and values that are uniquely yours and need expression, versus what you have been programmed to believe that you are "supposed to be and do." (2, emphasis in the original)

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1 I exclusively use the masculine pronoun here as the crisis of the liberal humanist subject appears to have been a predominantly masculine crisis in the period and medium indicated.

According to this account, each individual has an innate “core” that, we can infer, is the source of his or her personality, characteristics, abilities, etc. independent of social and cultural influence. The debate on freedom embedded in this description is one in which the core self is opposed to forms of social control. A confluence of the pressures of various institutions and personal experiences, it should further be inferred, results in conditions that force one to think and act in ways antithetical to the inclinations of the authentic self’s core. To realize one’s self fully, one needs to free oneself from such psycho-social restraints and thereby enable unrestrained access to one’s core, one’s authentic self, to one’s true potential in its uncorrupted natural form. The self McGraw sketches out is thus a markedly essentialist self that might be positioned on the nature side of the somewhat dusty nature vs. culture debate. Even in McGraw’s very brief description above, one can identify traces of an extended history of essentialist-humanist thinking that has situated itself against external influence, from Rousseau’s noble savage, to the Cartesian cogito isolated from external input and impulses, to the individual freedom and autonomy of the Enlightenment subject (from Hobbes and Locke to Kant) that C.B. Macpherson reformulates in terms of “possessive individualism” in his influential work *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. If book sales and viewer ratings are taken as indications of the popularity such a model might hold, then this particular account of the authentic self was undoubtedly resonant with a large segment of media-consuming Americans at the time. My wager is that we can find further support for such a claim in mainstream cinema of the same era. The figure of the essentialist, liberal humanist subject (‘LHS’ from here on), whose ‘core,’ identity, individuality or authenticity is under threat of compromise by external agents, is *the* most prominent figure in posthumanist panic cinema at the turn of the century, giving expression to a particular form of millennial dis-ease.

Posthumanist panic cinema might be conceived of as cinema that stages some form of threat to the liberal humanist subject’s authenticity. To reduce what is at stake here to a single phrase, one might claim that the authenticity of the LHS is grounded in its forms of essentialism. What makes the LHS authentic is the innate status ascribed to its characteristics and its potential as a free agent. Guignon categorizes

characteristics of liberal humanism and Enlightenment subjectivity more generally as indicators for authentic subjectivity in the modern era: “[T]he modern worldview understands humans as nuclear selves. To be human, on this view, is to be a self-contained, bounded individual, a center of experience and will, with no essential or defining relations to anything or anyone outside oneself” (108). According to this definition, what Guignon refers to as the authentic subject in modern philosophy and what, following N. Katherine Hayles, I am calling the liberal humanist subject might be positioned in contrast to what Bernd Stiegler recently referred to as a ‘best of’ subject theory in the humanities: psychoanalysis (Freud, Lacan), discourse and power (Foucault, Derrida), capital and empire (Marx; Hardt and Negri), ideology (Althusser), performativity and gender (Butler, Halberstam), post-colonialism (Fanon, Bhabha, Said, Spivak), not to mention the contemporary currents in posthumanism seeking to push the subject off the map.<sup>2</sup> This synoptic list of approaches to subject theory in the humanities makes immediately clear that what have turned out to be the most prominent approaches of the last century are all opposed to essentialist notions of the self.<sup>3</sup>

The five characteristics Guignon enumerates as constitutive of the authentic subject are more or less interchangeable with the definitive elements of liberal humanism and are thus useful for clarifying precisely what comes under threat in posthumanist panic cinema:

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- 2 Stiegler’s comment was in reference to a talk given by Jörg Metelmann and myself titled “Visualizing Subjectivity: A Dual Ontology,” at the University of St. Gallen, 2 May 2011.
  - 3 N. Katherine Hayles theorizes the decline of liberal subjectivity in relation to the onset of “cybernetic anxiety” in the 1950s in her chapter “Liberal Subjectivity Imperiled: Norbert Wiener and Cybernetic Anxiety” of *How We Became Posthuman* (84). Thinking of the LHS primarily defined through its essentialism, the threat against it has a far broader historical base in the humanities. In this context, it perhaps makes more sense to subsume cybernetics in a broader intellectual history over the last century that repeatedly took turns at dismantling the LHS.

1. the authentic subject is defined as an “inner space;”
2. it is the “source from which action springs;”
3. it has the capacity for self-reflection and self-consciousness;
4. it is “self-subsistent, distinct from everything outside itself, including its own body;”
5. self-realization is the ultimate goal (Guignon 108-9)

To briefly recapitulate these points through established (primarily Enlightenment) notions of the self, the first reiterates the notion of an essential core, and is thus concerned with the question of borders; the second reiterates Rousseau’s notion of the noble savage, and is thus concerned with a natural sense of character and agency; the third reiterates Descartes’s *cogito*; the fourth, Descartes’s mind/body split and radical autonomy; and the fifth returns to the notion of an essentialist core, hidden under the constraints of society and the psyche and in need of freeing. One might thus also link the final point to Kant’s Enlightenment injunction *Sapere Aude!*, where the courage to embrace self-knowledge will ultimately liberate the individual from self-imposed immaturity and deliver him into self-realization.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely the threat to borders of the self, to agency, to the authenticity of self-consciousness, to autonomy and to self-realization that is at stake in posthumanist panic cinema.

## POSTHUMANIST PANIC CINEMA

What is posthumanist panic cinema? The term should indicate both cinema that depicts representations of the posthuman and threat to humanist philosophies and ideologies. Though the terms posthuman and posthumanism are rather close and have at times been conflated by some theorists, one would be hard pressed to legitimate the claim that posthuman cinema is more representative of posthumanist philosophies than it is of humanist ones, wherein lies the point: posthuman cinema generally depicts various forms of panic expressive of anxiety

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4 Immanuel Kant’s famous response to the question “What is Enlightenment?” in the *Berlinische Monatschrift*, November, 1784.

regarding the status of the LHS. Posthuman cinema has often taken a reactionary stance in opposition to philosophies of posthumanism. If, following popular usage, posthuman cinema consists primarily in stories of artificial intelligence, virtual realities, alien abduction or visitation and cyborgian science fiction, then the filmic narratives of posthuman cinema tend to position themselves anxiously in relation to logics of posthumanism and nostalgically, even desperately, in relation to tenets of humanism. Posthuman popular cinema, one might say, is in a state of crisis. That is not to say it is in immediate danger of becoming financially unviable. To the contrary: though its concerns might be shifting, posthuman cinema continues to reverberate through multiplexes, across the screens of portable devices and along the corridors of collective imaginaries. With its capacity for metamorphosis and for mirroring desire and anxiety on the border between the known and the yet-to-be known, posthuman cinema is alive, but not well – at least not from a posthumanist perspective. If posthumanist theory attempts to map the philosophical territory that succeeds humanist thought, posthuman cinema has been astute to the turbulence accompanying such a shift.

Inquiring into “what remains of humanism in the posthumanist landscape” (15), Neil Badmington has suggested that, from a Derridian or Lyotardian position on the uses of the prefix *post-*, “posthumanism does not (and, moreover, cannot) mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism [...]. Humanism has happened and continues to happen to ‘us’ (it is the very ‘Thing’ that makes ‘us’ ‘us,’ in fact)” (21-22). Though recent shifts in posthumanist theory appear to be making headway on this front – challenging notions of ‘us,’ for example, by focusing elsewhere (not on human beings as individuals or subjects, or not on topics like consciousness and agency), through processes of re-contextualization and re-categorization (as in second order systems theory), or by expanding the category of ‘us’ to be more broadly inclusive (as in animal studies) – much of posthuman cinema has been concerned with the remains of the human in posthuman biotic and non-biotic communities, and what can be salvaged of humanism in an age where prosthetic coupling and recursive interactivity, what Cary Wolfe calls “the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms

(such as language and culture),” becomes “increasingly impossible to ignore” (Wolfe xv).

Of course, with fictional narratives to be read, heard and viewed, there is also the function of identification to consider. If one is to gain access to a story, then it is through some form of focalization. From the various possible perspectives we take when we read or watch films, as humans we access narratives and identify within them primarily – though with exception – via characters that either are or highly resemble humans.<sup>5</sup> Be that as it may, it would also be amiss to claim that posthuman cinema does not move into the territory of proper posthumanist, non-anthropocentric representation and philosophical discourse because, from a narratological perspective, it cannot. Considering the ways in which popular cinema reflects and reflexively contributes to collective preoccupations, one might postulate that posthuman cinema is for the most part not interested in decentring the human, nor in doing away with humanism. The dominant story has rather been one of anxiety regarding forms of decentrement.

Rather than presenting a viable posthumanist philosophy, posthuman cinema predominantly stages posthumanist anxiety about the loss of or threat to defining characteristics of the LHS even when the viewer is prompted to identify with the figure of the biological posthuman, as in the filmic adaptations of Phillip K. Dick’s post-utopian, paranoid science fiction. N. Katherine Hayles has proposed that the decline of the LHS is inaugurated by Norbert Wiener’s theory of cybernetics presented at the Macy conferences in the mid-1940s: “By the mid-twentieth century, liberal humanism, self-regulating machinery, and positive individualism had come together in an uneasy alliance that at once helped to create the cyborg and also undermine the foundations of liberal subjectivity” (86). She also notes that the work of Phillip K. Dick in the 1960s was particularly attuned to the potential threat self-regulating machines posed to liberal humanism. Dick’s depictions of the cyborg begged the question, “should a cybernetic machine, sufficiently powerful in its self-regulating processes to become fully conscious and rational, be allowed to own itself?” (ibid). Dick’s fiction thus foregrounded a sudden instability the cyborg en-

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5 For an analysis of posthumanist focalization, see Clarke.



gendered for assumptions about authenticity, autonomy and agency, and by extension what it meant to be human. With the unprecedented influence Dick has had on an era of film-making, Hayles's remark could not be more pertinent to the anxieties reflected in posthumanist panic cinema.

The notion of the posthuman in posthumanist panic cinema employed here – portraying what comes after or is beyond the biological human at a specific historical moment – is aligned with the popular notion outlined above: artificial intelligence, virtual realities, alien abduction or visitation and cyborgian science fiction. Added to the scope of this rather conventional category of the posthuman is a consideration of conspiracy films. Where posthuman cinema reflects types of posthumanist anxiety about body and identity borders and differentiation through representations of the posthuman form, conspiracy films tend to articulate similar types of panic in relation to autonomy, agency and control. Although conspiracy films need not present the figure of the biological posthuman, they are likewise always concerned with borders, differentiation and alterity. It is thus not surprising that conspiracy narratives are inevitably tied into the stories and plots of more conventional posthuman, that is cyborgian and extra-terrestrial, cinema.

The elements of threat in posthumanist panic cinema can be categorized according to three interrelated but distinct crises represented in the three interrelated but distinct sub-genres: cyborgia and the crisis of authenticity, conspiracy and the crisis of agency/autonomy, extra-terrestrials and the crisis of metaphysical determinism. Each of these panic cinema sub-genres are characterized by a central threat that, with great consistency, organizes character actions and drives the plot. In cyborg or artificial intelligence films, the threat is one of no longer being able to distinguish between the authentic and the inauthentic in terms of physical and biological processes, but also in terms of identity formation, cognition and emotional capacities. Conspiracy films are characterized by a compromise of free will and the ability to effect meaningful action. Finally, extra-terrestrial films are characterized by a more general threat to human autonomy, where non-human agencies can potentially determine the fate of human subjects, though as I will show, the threat in extra-terrestrial cinema can simultaneously repre-

sent both anxiety about and desire for metaphysically deterministic agencies.

With the proliferation of 'real life' alien abduction testimonials around the turn of the century, and with continuing mutual paranoia from both the politically conservative and liberal communities about the other controlling the media in order to manipulate popular opinion, extra-terrestrials and conspiracy have become commonplace topics in America that receive earnest attention even in non-fictional popular media: think, for example, of conspiracy theories surrounding the 9/11 attacks that placed blame on the conservative 'powers that be,' or Glenn Beck's more recent prime-time explanations of the vicissitudes of power on the left. Equally, real cyborgia has become a second nature, so to speak: there is uninterrupted connectivity to apparatuses for communication and information retrieval, as well as inextricable binds to machines, gadgets, medicines and other prostheses that accompany humans through their daily lives, and a broad recognition throughout the humanities of language as a kind of proto-prosthesis to the human. Moreover, digital social network technologies have quite literally transported communicable identity formation and potential subjectivity into the realm of the virtual. Taking all of this into consideration, I would wager that the enormous commercial success posthumanist panic cinema has enjoyed can hardly be reduced to the appeal of escape into sci-fi fantasy worlds. It has much more to do with the ability for popular cinema to both reflect and shape the concerns of viewing audiences beyond the world of cinematic fiction.

The popularity of extra-terrestrial, conspiracy and cyborg narratives in and beyond fiction is perhaps not cause enough to consider them together as constitutive of a shared phenomenon in popular culture. The level of genre-hybridity between posthuman and conspiracy narratives, though, points toward the shared humanist sensibilities that have constituted the particular form of millennial dis-ease in relation to the LHS addressed above. Uniting these sub-genres beyond their sensibilities about subjectivity and the liberal humanist characteristics of authenticity, agency, autonomy and the desire for stable metaphysical truths, are their shared thematic content depicting fear of new technologies and of the foreign, concern about political ideologies and social cohesion, and modes of expressing and experiencing the spir-

itual or quasi-religious within a secular context. Whatever various elements these sub-genres share or intermingle, their respective narratives almost always revolve around a central allegorical commentary on authentic subjectivity and are expressive of some form of posthumanist anxiety, thus indicating an overarching theme of authentic subjectivity in crisis structuring or giving impetus to the allegories. The following will be a brief, though I hope nevertheless enlightening consideration of LHS crises divided among the posthumanist panic cinema sub-genres.

## CYBORGIA AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Cyborg and artificial intelligence films interrogate the implications of the artificial being for the authentic human. But what kind of authenticity are we talking about? With the decoding of DNA and with the ability to clone complex biological organisms, authenticity can hardly still have anything to do with the natural processes of conception and generation or with biological and non-biological difference. Descartes already theorized this shift with the mechanical monkey of his *Mediations on First Philosophy*. Authenticity will have to be sought elsewhere. As I have illustrated in an earlier article drawing on the theoretical framework of Louis Althusser's notion of "interpellation," films such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, Steven Spielberg's *A.I.* and filmic versions of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* all stage processes of identity and subject formation as a central component in obfuscating the boundaries between human authenticity and cyborgian artificiality.<sup>6</sup>

In his 'notes' on ideology, socio-ideological structures and subjectivity, moving from a necessary though complicated distinction between concrete individuals and concrete subjects, Louis Althusser defines interpellation as a hailing of the individual into subjectivity. Ideological (state) apparatus such as schools, family, religion, political affiliation and profession repeatedly hail the individual, at once forming the individual's social status as a subject along with their private iden-

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6 See Loren.

tity. They position the individual within the ideological and symbolic matrix of relations to other subjects and institutions. The hailed individual acknowledges that he or she – or *it* in the age of posthumanism – is the proper subject of the call by recognizing the call and responding to it accordingly. Thus, a perpetual reestablishing and reaffirmation of positions within the social-symbolic takes place, through which not only is the hailed subject located, but, by being located in relation to all the subtle and not so subtle conditions of the life surrounding, interpellation functions in an omni-directional manner, situating and re-situating all subjects and subjectivities.

If the cyborg or automaton of cyborgian cinema does not pose an outright physical threat to humans, as in the case of the first *Terminator* film (James Cameron, 1984), then the threat it consistently poses is one in which its identity formation processes mirror that of the human. In each of the films noted above, effective processes of interpellation make the distinction between human identity-subjectivity and non-human identity-subjectivity increasingly meaningless. Think, for example, of the mental images (memories and dreams) and physical pictures the Replicants of *Blade Runner* carry around with them as evidence of their humanity and authenticity, or of the literal staging of the interpellative process in *A.I.* (the “Imprinting Protocol” scene), where the naming of characters in relation to one another literally hardwires the cyber-boy with love for his orga-mother (and much to the mother’s surprise this also functions *vice versa*).

There are of course other means of obfuscating the distinction between authenticity and artificiality in these films. From the super-computer Hal’s survival instincts in *2001*, to the possession of a soul and eye as the window to the soul in *Blade Runner*, to the Oedipal love of one’s mother in *A.I.*, to the desire for paternal and conjugal companionship in *Frankenstein*, the cyborg becomes an increasingly emotional, creative, moral, critical and humane figure. An additionally consistent pattern in cyborg cinema, though, is that despite the authenticity of its human characteristics, whether these are of appearance or quality of character, the artificial being must inevitably perish at the hands of its creator. The problem it poses, of course, is one of authenticity. With the image and the character of the artificial being raised to the level of authenticity – that is, in addition to its physical human form, the artificial

being is in possession of all of the defining characteristics of the LHS – the authentic human itself becomes, to borrow Benjamin’s phrase, “the blue flower in the land of technology,” an imaginary projection of a lost ideal that technology has penetrated to the heart of (Benjamin 458; my translation).<sup>7</sup> To extend the reference to Benjamin a bit further, one might claim that if the cyborg makes the authenticity of the LHS problematic, then at stake is the aura of authenticity, a distinctive individuality that has been raised to a deific status in liberal humanism, and now threatens to crumble, or already has.

In cyborgia, the human is positioned vis-à-vis the posthuman artificial being, exhibiting difficulties in determining alterity and, moreover, in determining what these very difficulties represent. These films begin their commentary on alterity by making the physical appearance of the artificial being either radically different from or radically similar to the human. Their collective aim, however, is to frame the subject-forming processes as identical for both the artificial being and the human. By depicting subject- and identity-forming processes for the artificial being as indistinguishable from the human being, these narratives provide a kind of meta-commentary on authenticity with regard to subjectivity and identity. They iterate the notion that subjectivity, and through it identity, is a construct negotiated beyond the individual’s own reflexive notions of the self; or, beyond the jurisdiction of liberal humanist essentialism. What viewers thus witness in cyborg cinema is an extension of the nature versus culture debate, in which if we assume that culture has prevailed, the borders to the authentic human disintegrate. The threat to the borders of human authenticity presented in cyborg cinema in turn also raise symptomatic questions in response to the fear of subjectivity as a social construct: if my identity is not something that springs forth naturally from myself, then who is responsible for its coming into being? And to what extent do these ‘external agents’ have control over me? This questioning logic provides the best link to the paranoid structures of perception that provide the fundamental energies and logics driving the plots of conspiracy narratives.

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7 Original: “[...] der Anblick der unmittelbaren Wirklichkeit zu der blauen Blume im Lande der Technik.”

## CONSPIRACY

Where narratives on automatons and artificial beings give expression to crises in relation to the authenticity of identity, conspiracy narratives have a reactionary quality in which anxiety about a loss of agency and autonomy manifests itself in the notion that an external agent has taken over command of the authentic self. Conspiracy situates subjects in relation to an Other agent that imposes its will on the individual, and whose will the individual feels compelled to reject. Considering this structure in the manner I have done with cyborgia – as potentially reflective of a widespread cultural discomfort with the shift from Enlightenment and humanist notions of the authentic, essentialist self (nature) to constructivist notions of the authentic self (culture) in popular culture – it is a logical turn to associate anxiety about a loss of agency and autonomy with constructivist notions of the self. One also finds that although the focus is slightly different, being on autonomy and agency as definitive of authenticity as opposed to biology and identity/subjectivity forming processes as indicators for authenticity, the problem is still rooted in anxiety about the LHS essentialist core.

As with the crisis of authenticity structuring cyborg cinema, we can see how an essentialist crisis might be symptomatic of dominant notions of selfhood circulating in late modernity: the subject as a production of economic and political forces; the psyche, the ‘real core’ of the individual, is in a state of perpetual antagonism and beyond the individual’s control; the subject as occupying a position at the intersection of various ideologies and social forces. Some kind of false synthesis of these notions reached an apex in popular culture through discourses on and of postmodernism between the 1970s and 1990s. Despite the various problematic receptions of subject theories, particularly where subject formation is completely free-floating and able to be formed and transformed at will, postmodernism convincingly popularized notions of the subject as something fluid and always already de-centred. Such perspectives destabilized traditional notions of borders to the self, and newfound fluidity led to completely new “technologies of the self,” to borrow Foucault’s phrase.

As a symptom-figure of these social and cultural developments, one might argue, the conspired against individual fears the loss of its ability

to protect its own borders and control its own actions. Perhaps even more than in cyborg cinema, conspiracy necessarily presupposes an essentialist self. It comes as no surprise that we find some form of invasive surgery or penetration to the head as a repeated motif in conspiracy cinema. Such images reiterate the notion that the core of the authentic self is to be found in the mind, in the *cogito* (see Guignon's fourth point above). In *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998), for example, the classical conspiracy trope of brainwashing is replaced by an injection directly into the brain, manipulating one's memory and one's sense of self, enabling the individual to be completely manipulated in every detail of life without being aware of any change whatsoever. The individual becomes an unsuspecting puppet. Jonathan Demme's remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004) also marks this more radical invasiveness to the *cogito* as the authentic core of the self by visually intensifying the compromise of its borders. Where John Frankenheimer's original (1962) famously stages manipulation through brainwash, Demme stages an elaborate surgical procedure in which penetration to the 'core' is doubled on screen. We see Sgt. Raymond Shaw (Liev Schreiber) in an operation room having a hole drilled through his skull and into his brain. On a screen behind the operation table, we see a blown-up computer tomography image of what is happening in Sgt. Shaw's head: a drill penetrates his skull and a minute device for controlling him is inserted deep into his brain. The shift in imagery between the 1962 version and the 2004 version is representative of the shift from cold-war anxiety about an unseen enemy who might compromise national borders and attempt to take control from without or through infiltration, to postmodern anxiety about the compromise of borders and loss of control at a far more intimate level, penetrating deep into the core of the authentic self.

If conspiracy is viewed as symptomatic of a nostalgic longing for a return to the autonomy of the liberal humanist subject with a protected inner core, one might interpret the anxiety reflected in conspiracy as a response to the poststructuralist and psychoanalytical deconstruction and rescinding of an internal/external dialectic. As the images of cogito/brain penetration suggest, conspiracy narratives cling to an internal/external opposition. According to these terms, conspiratorial anxiety is directed at a lack of unified centring (a non-object that divides the subject). Victoria Nelson has suggested that

From Plato to Descartes, the image of the puppetmaster pulling the strings to make his creation move had emblemized first a presumed division between soul and body, then one between mind and body. Recognizing the close connection of the puppet and the robot with notions of intrapersonal invasion, manipulation, and loss of autonomy, the new twentieth-century discipline of psychology identified the sensation that an alien entity is manipulating the afflicted person, ‘pulling the strings,’ as a symptom of various types of pathology, particularly schizophrenia. (252)

If we view conspiracy through the lens of a lack of centring that antagonistically amplifies psychic tensions regarding identity, agency and autonomy, coupled with the lens of schizophrenia, we inevitably land in the proximity of Deleuzian ontological heterogeneity. Not surprisingly, various cultural theorists working on conspiracy, from Mark Fenster and Patrick O'Donnell, to Jodi Dean and Peter Knight, partially ascribe the widespread prominence of conspiracy theories in American popular culture to the social and psychological effects of the logics of late capitalism.

In *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Timothy Melley describes conspiracy theories as reactionary narratives that hinge on a condition in which the individual experiences “intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control – the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been ‘constructed’ by powerful external agents” (12). Thus characterized, the individual is at a loss to effect meaningful, authentic action. Alessandro Ferrara has suggested that “[a]uthentic conduct has the quality of being somehow connected with, and expressive of, the core of the actor’s personality” (5). Calling for a reconsideration of authenticity beyond the “internalist” and “externalist” accounts, Monika Betzler similarly states that it is a common though problematic intuition that “a person is self-governed only if she acts for reasons grounded in her authentic self” (51). In addition to these explanations, which take the position of potential compromise and loss of control, it is also necessary to position the subject of conspiracy as an individual who can no longer be held accountable for his or her own actions. Melley suggests that the popularity of conspiracy narratives stems from a “sense of diminished human agency, a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social



action and, in extreme cases, may not be able to control their own behavior” (11). We might think of such conditions in conjunction with what Slovenj Žižek terms the logic of victimization: “[I]s the basic characteristic of today’s ‘postmodern’ subject not the exact opposite of the free subject who experienced himself as ultimately responsible for his fate, namely the subject who grounds the authority of his speech on his status of a victim of circumstances beyond his control?” (124). Where the concept of autonomy loses currency within a cultural economy of ideologies, it becomes increasingly possible to place the blame for one’s actions elsewhere.

We find tropes for this condition throughout conspiracy and other posthumanist panic cinemas. Take, for a rather explicit example, the narrator of Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, adapted to the screen in 1999 by David Fincher. He ascribes his own transgressive desire and behaviour to another person entirely, only to find out in the end that he is this other person, that through a trick of the mind he was able to both live out and keep himself at a distance from his transgressive desire and behaviour. Although the practical trope for usurped control differs between Demme’s *Manchurian Candidate* and Fincher’s *Fight Club*, we again witness manipulation taking place at the most intimate location of the authentic self, the *cogito*. *Fight Club* is the best example of staging schizophrenia as a conspiracy against oneself. It also poignantly stages this condition as a direct result of late capitalist consumer lifestyle, and on these terms constructs a very similar philosophy to Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985).

Conspiracy cinema at the turn of the century displayed a wide range of modes of control. At the far end of the scale of manipulation, there are characters that have been programmed, such as everyone connected to the Matrix from the Wachowski brothers’ film of the same title. Again, here we find the trope of cogito penetration represented by the ‘cranial jack.’ We also find wholly manufactured individuals, as in Michael Bay’s *The Island*, where cloned individuals are manufactured as capital, waiting to be used as a biological resource. In such cases, the individual has been programmed or manipulated to such a degree that it might be considered a pure ‘product.’ Indeed, the abundance of product placement in Bay’s film takes on new significance when viewed from this perspective.

To provide an additional turn in conspiracy cinema and its anxieties about authenticity, conspiracy can also be understood in terms of anxiety about a lack of deterministic metaphysical meaning. Paranoia about an omnipotent and omniscient Other can inversely reflect a desire for such an Other, an entity constitutive of one's subjectivity and selfhood, providing being with a deeper meaning. That is, conspiracy can be understood not only in terms of fear of an overbearing Other that might compromise the borders to my authentic self, but also as symptomatic of the fear that there is no higher source that might substantiate one's existence by lending it a greater purpose, through a deeper metaphysical authenticity.

Fear of an omnipotent oppressive Other also inversely representative of the desire for an Other is very much how posthumanist panic cinema around the millennial turn was interpreting Descartes's *Meditations*. This double-edged sword – a desire for an omniscient, omnipotent Other mixed with fear of an omniscient, omnipotent Other – is well represented in the ghost of Descartes's evil genius that prominently appears with *Blade Runner* and continues to haunt posthumanist panic cinema. It seems that it is no longer possible to read the *Meditations on First Philosophy* without raising the question that, if it is possible that nothing exists outside my mind, that through a deception of the senses I have simply dreamt everything up, then why is it not possible that I am simply a projection, a fantasy, in someone else's dream – Descartes's malevolent demon? This is the philosophical query structuring the plots and narratives of films such as *Blade Runner*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, *eXistenZ*, *A.I.*, *Minority Report*, *Vanilla Sky* and *The Matrix Trilogy*, all notably staging a mix of cyborgia and conspiracy. The conflation of fear and desire of and for an omniscient and omnipotent Other, though, finds its literal apotheosis in the third incarnation of posthumanist panic projected onto the screen: extra-terrestrial cinema.

## EXTRA-TERRESTRIALS

Jodi Dean suggests that, like the conspiratorial Other, “the alien takes away our agency, and the sense of security and certainty upon which our agency was predicated” (174). The alien is in possession of

knowledge and power beyond human capacities and can attack, abduct, infiltrate or exterminate at will. Abstracting the defining characteristics of the extra-terrestrial into familiar terms, the alien, like the conspiratorial Other, is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. As such, the alien and the conspiratorial Other both present a threat to the human that engenders metaphysical fear. Think, for example, of the various extra-terrestrial narratives that are apocalyptic in nature, from H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898) to M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs* (2002). Of course, the alien in cinema not only represents a wrathful sky-god. It is also the embodiment of a strong desire for non-secular identity anchors; the alien can alternately represent a wrathful god and a benevolent one.

Extra-terrestrial cinema emphasizes the desire for metaphysical determinism in posthumanist panic cinema by giving the stories and imagery a more mystical, quasi-religious character. Caron Schwarz Ellis suggests that the appearance of aliens in popular cinema addresses both "our deepest fears about technology and [...] spiritual questions about our destiny" (83). Although this point is brought to the fore in extra-terrestrial cinema, the mystical and quasi-religious are also evident to varying degrees in cyborgia and conspiracy: think of the god-creator theme in *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner*, or Neo as saviour in *The Matrix* and Dan Brown's enormously successful Christian mystery conspiracy fictions and their filmic adaptations. Desire for metaphysically deterministic, quasi-mystical meaning is an additional element uniting cyborgia, conspiracy and extra-terrestrial cinema, constituting an additional posthumanist crisis. With the addition of this particular form of crisis, posthumanist panic cinema is capable of staging anxiety about the compromised LHS's authenticity, autonomy and agency, but also anxiety about the loss of what was transformed in the secularization of the authentic self: spiritual subjectivity. Although the LHS is generally thought of in relation to secular humanism, it has often been argued that the humanist displacement of deities or God offers no significant departure from the Judeo-Christian structures of theism; that the human itself is simply raised to the status of divinity, thus constituting a mere shift from theism to deism. As Foucault pointed out in "What is Enlightenment," "[S]ince the seventeenth century, what has been called humanism has always been obliged to lean

on certain conceptions of man borrowed from religion, science or politics” (44). The nostalgia, or something more urgent, for non-secular subjectivity anchors is not in conflict with the LHS tenets of agency and autonomy, but rather accompanies them in a hidden form.

Posthumanist panic cinema is thus characterized by a confluence of technological fear and fetish coupled with a loss of agency, problems of autonomy and desire for metaphysically deterministic meaning. Not surprisingly, philosophizing on this unseemly knot of desire and anxiety regarding the physical and the metaphysical is not limited to popular American cinema. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor proposes three “malaises of modernity”:

1. Regarding individualism: “[W]orry has been repeatedly expressed that the individual lost something important along with the larger social and cosmic horizons of action” (3). “Instead of a higher purpose that opens the space for heroic action, there is only “abnormal and regrettable self-absorption” (4).
2. Regarding “instrumental reason”: “[T]he primacy of instrumental reason is also evident in the prestige and aura that surrounds technology, and makes us believe that we should seek technological solutions even when something very different is called for” (6).
3. Regarding the loss of political vigour: a combined result of points 1 and 2, in which “the institutions and structures of industrial-technological society severely restrict our choices,” forcing “societies as well as individuals to give a weight to instrumental reason that in serious moral deliberation we would never do” (8).

Taylor’s third malaise recalls Nietzsche’s last man in that “few will want to participate actively in self-government” but would “prefer to stay at home and enjoy the satisfactions of private life” (Taylor 9). As long as the government provides for the conditions that allow for non-political personal pleasures, the individual is satisfied to increasingly withdraw from a politicized social sphere. Taylor suggests that such a condition leads to what Tocqueville called “soft despotism,” where the “vast bureaucratic state” contributes to a feeling of helplessness and powerlessness (think again of *Brazil* and *Fight Club*) (Taylor 10).

Drawing a parallel between these notions and posthumanist panic cinema, it seems to me that one might unproblematically link Taylor's third malaise, along with Nietzsche's last man and Tocqueville's soft despotism, to Timothy Melley's concept of "agency panic," which characterizes conspiracy culture in America: the fear of powerful external forces of economy and the state coupled with the feeling of an inability to effect meaningful action (Melley 12).

In Taylor's model, feelings of helplessness and powerlessness circularly relate back to the relinquishing of agency and inability to ground authentic action in deeper social or metaphysical formations of meaning. In these terms, it appears that posthumanist panic cinema philosophizes about the compromises to the LHS in much the same way Taylor and the tradition he draws on does, with a focus on authenticity, autonomy and metaphysical meaning; or as Taylor puts it, "the loss of meaning" and "fading moral horizons," "the eclipse of the ends," and the "loss of freedom" (10). Though where Taylor's analysis is descriptive and prescriptive, posthumanist panic cinema as a cultural artifact is symptomatic.

An extract from Sigmund Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* is helpful in addressing the mystico-religious turn extra-terrestrial cinema puts on the paranoid structure of suspicion about an omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent Other in posthumanist panic cinema. He proposes that religion and religious narratives in pre-secular societies protected the individual from various neuroses and helped to prevent an indulgence in a pathological adherence to imaginary (in the Lacanian sense) structures. He also addresses the types of neuroses that can develop once religious institutions and narratives lose their potency:

Even those who do not regret the disappearance of religious illusions from the civilized world of today will admit that so long as they were in force they offered those who were bound by them the most powerful protection against the danger of neurosis. Nor is it hard to discern that all the ties that bind people to mystico-religious or philosophico-religious sects and communities are expression of crooked cures of all kinds of neuroses [...]. If he is left to himself, a neurotic is obliged to replace by his own symptom formations the great group formations from which he is excluded. He creates his own world of imagina-

tion for himself, his own religion, his own system of delusions, and thus recapitulates the institutions of humanity in a distorted way [...]. (Freud 74)

Freud's hypothesis is a useful supplement to the obviousness with which extra-terrestrial narratives employ spiritual or religious motifs to stage anxieties concerning both the individual's potential metaphysical determination and its being-in-the-world. By extension, Freud's claim can also shed light on the posthumanist anxiety reflected in posthumanist panic cinema more generally, with cyborg, conspiracy and extra-terrestrial cinema staging and reflecting on psychic tensions and pathological perceptions of the self in relation to anxieties about authentic modes of subjectivity. However implicit or explicit, at stake in such narratives is always the individual's perception of itself in relation to society and anxieties about the social forces that determine selfhood and subjectivity. In this regard, cyborg, conspiracy and extra-terrestrial cinema can be thought of in terms of a popularized reactionary response to social constructivism, which does not offer anchors for authentic selfhood in non-secular metaphysical forms, nor in the Enlightenment mode of autonomy, nor in the humanist mode of authenticity and agency; and it is in this sense that the respective anxieties they stage should be understood as symptomatic of posthumanist anxieties.

## HUMANISM AND POSTHUMANISM

As Neil Badmington has suggested, discourse on posthumanism automatically assumes two approximate poles of historical and philosophical perceptions of the human subject: the humanist and the posthumanist. The advent of the secular humanist position is usually contextualized in relation to the triad of the Cartesian subject, Renaissance Humanism and post-Enlightenment secular Humanism. To whatever extent these three categorizations for positioning a notion of the human differ, they all share a principle of essentialism, where metaphysical truth claims about human authenticity and potential agency are the focus of discourse and serve to affirm notions of an authentic self. Although the Cartesian and Enlightenment self may conceivably

be influenced from the outside, the humanist subject does not find any source for its being in anything external to itself. It is rather a natural self that springs forth independent of the individual's experience in the world and whose borders of the self constitute a distinction between the individual's autonomy and agency, and the world that the individual moves within. It is precisely this tradition of essentialism that posthumanist theory is opposed to, and that posthumanist panic cinema stages a fearful loss of.

In its counter-position to the humanist principle of essentialism, the human subject as autonomous agent, and against the human subject as the organizing principle and focus of knowledge and discourse, posthumanism functions on a principle of decentrement. On the one hand, this is a result of technology. On the other hand, current posthumanist theory of decentrement is anchored in anti-humanist and post-structuralist philosophies, such as the theoretical anti-humanism Althusser proposes in his defense of Marx against theoretical anthropology, and Foucault's archaeological deconstruction of "man," as "an invention of recent date" (Foucault, *Order* 387). Both Althusser and Foucault decentre the human by putting universal humanist truth-claims fundamentally into doubt and contextualizing the human as historically constructed through ideological discourses. In the same years (from 1964 to 1966), Derrida achieves this destabilization of universal truth claims or the "transcendental signified" by arguing that the centre (of historical thought, knowledge, language) "was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play" (Derrida 353-54). For posthumanist theory, the anti-humanist tradition provides a crucial turn by destabilizing universal truth claims about the human, and destabilizing the so-called centre of subject-centred discourse: Althusser moves agency from the human to a structural formula of social relations, Foucault to the episteme of a particular historic era, and Derrida to language – each constituting a theory of radical contingency that, as Lacanian subject theory did, divides the subject, turning the individual into what one might term a 'dividual.'

Where philosophies of posthumanism are, with some exceptions, logical extensions of theory in the humanities that divide, decentre, deconstruct and displace the LHS, posthumanist panic cinema can be

seen as presenting a kind of reactionary skepticism regarding subject formation as it is articulated from various logics of social constructivist theories. What troubles the subject of posthumanist panic cinema can to a large extent be attributed to the idea that identity and, much less so, subjectivity are not something that simply spring forth from the individual, but are perpetually negotiated and renegotiated from the start, and that this negotiation does not consist of a struggle to discover one's authentic self and realize one's natural potential, but rather of the struggle for proper positioning in social systems (including language).

Though for quite some time it has been neither radical nor particularly original for theory to claim that the subject is unthinkable beyond the context of the social, perhaps this is not what is at stake in popular cinema's portrayals of destabilizing essentialism in the last thirty or forty years. Posthumanist panic cinema might rather be thought of as addressing itself to the viewer-subject's latent knowledge of its own decentrement. As such, we might think of posthumanist panic cinema in terms of symptom-formation – "the result of a specific process, of a psychical working out" – of collective preoccupations about authenticity, agency, individualism, technology, subjectivity, social formations, locations of power, etc (Laplanche/Pontalis 446). As W.J.T. Mitchell has put it, "[S]till another task [of art] is the re-articulation of what we mean by the human, by humanism, and the humanities" (498).

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